CHAPTER XVII

TWO MONASTERIES AND A PROCESSION

The Certosa—A Company of Uncles—The Cells—Machiavelli—Impruneta—The della Robbias—Pontassieve—Pelago—Milton's simile—Vallombrosa—S. Gualberto—Prato and the Lippis—The Grassina Albergo—An American invasion—The Procession of the Dead Christ—My loss.

EVERY one who merely visits Florence holds it a duty to bring home at least one flask of the Val d'Ema liqueur from the Carthusian monastery four or five miles distant from the city, not because that fiery distillation is peculiarly attractive but because the vessels which contain it are at once pretty decorations and evidences of travel and culture. They can be bought in Florence itself, it is true (at a shop at the corner of the Via de' Cerretani, close to the Baptistery), but the Certosa is far too interesting to miss, if one has time to spare from the city's own treasures. The trams start from the Mercato Nuovo and come along the Via dell' Arcivescovado to the Baptistery, and so to the Porta Romana and out into the hilly country. The ride is dull and rather tiresome, for there is much waiting at sidings, but the expedition becomes attractive immediately the tram is left. There is then a short walk, principally up the long narrow approach to the monastery gates, outside which, when I was there, was sitting a beggar at a stone table, waiting for the bowl of soup to which all who ask are entitled.

Passing within the courtyard you ring the bell on the right and enter the waiting hall, from which, in the course of time, when a sufficient party has been gathered, an elderly monk in a white robe leads you away. How many monks there may be, I cannot say; but of the few of whom I caught a glimpse, all were alike in the possession of white beards and all suggested uncles in fancy dress. Ours spoke good French and was clearly a man of parts. Lulled by his soothing descriptions I passed in a kind of dream through this ancient abode of peace.

The Certosa dates from 1341 and was built and endowed by a wealthy merchant named Niccolò Acciaioli, after whom the Lungarno Acciaioli is named. The members of the family are still buried here, certain of the tombstones bearing dates of the present century. To-day it is little but a show place, the cells of the monks being mostly empty and the sale of the liqueur its principal reason for existence. But the monks who are left take a pride in their church, which is attributed to Orcagna, and its possessions, among which come first the relief monuments of early Acciaioli in the floor of one of the chapels—the founder's being perhaps also the work of Orcagna, while that of his son Lorenzo, who died in 1353, is attributed by our cicerone to Donatello, but by others to an unknown hand. It is certainly very beautiful. These tombs are the very reverse of those which we saw in S. Croce; for those bear the obliterating traces of centuries of footsteps, so that some are nearly flat with the stones, whereas these have been railed off for ever and have lost nothing. The other famous Certosa tomb is that of Cardinal Angelo Acciaioli, which, once given to Donatello, is now sometimes attributed to Giuliano di Sangallo and sometimes to his son Francesco.

THE PONTE VECCHIO AND BACK OF THE VIA DE' BARDI

The Certosa has a few good pictures, but it is as a monastery that it is most interesting: as one of the myriad lonely convents of Italy, which one sees so constantly from the train, perched among the Apennines, and did not expect ever to enter. The cloisters which surround the garden, in the centre of which is a well, and beneath which is the distillery, are very memorable, not only for their beauty but for the sixty and more medallions of saints and evangelists all round it by Giovanni della Robbia. Here the monks have sunned themselves, and here been buried, these five and a half centuries. One suite of rooms is shown, with its own little private garden and no striking discomfort except the hole in the wall by the bed, through which the sleeper is awakened. From its balcony one sees the Ema far below and hears the roar of a weir, and away in the distance is Florence with the Duomo and a third of Giotto's Campanile visible above the intervening hills.

Having shown you all the sights the monk leads you again to the entrance hall and bids you good-bye, with murmurs of surprise and a hint of reproach on discovering a coin in his hand, for which, however, none the less, he manages in the recesses of his robe to find a place; and you are then directed to the room where the liqueur, together with sweets and picture post-cards, is sold by another monk, assisted by a lay attendant, and the visit to the Certosa is over.

The tram that passes the Certosa continues along the valley by the Greve (a river which rises in Chianti) to S. Casciano, where there is a point of interest in the house to which Machiavelli retired in 1512, to give himself to literature and to live that wonderful double life—a peasant loafer by day in the fields and the village inn, and at night, dressed in his noblest clothes,

the cold, sagacious commentator on mankind. But at S. Casciano I did not stop.

And farther still one comes to the village of Impruneta, after climbing higher and higher, with lovely calm valleys on either side coloured by silver olive groves and vivid wheat and maize, and studded with white villas and villages and church towers. On the road every woman in every doorway plaits straw with rapid fingers just as if we were in Bedfordshire. Impruneta is famous for its new terra-cotta vessels and its ancient della Robbias. For in the church is some of Luca's most exquisite work—an altar-piece with a frieze of aerial angels under it, and a stately white saint on either side, and the loveliest decorated columns imaginable; while in an adjoining chapel is a Christ crucified mourned by the most dignified and melancholy of Magdalens. Andrea della Robbia is here too, and here also is a richly designed cantoria by Mino da Fiesole. The village is not in the regular programme of visitors, and Baedeker ignores it; hence perhaps the excitment which an arrival from Florence causes, for the children turn out in battalions. The church is very dirty, and so indeed is everything else; but no amount of grime can disguise the charm of the cloisters.

The Certosa is a mere half-hour from Florence, Impruneta an hour and a half; but Vallombrosa asks a long day. One can go by rail, changing at Sant' Ellero into the expensive rack-and-pinion car which climbs through the vineyards to a point near the summit, and has, since it was opened, brought to the mountain so many new residents, whose little villas cling to the western slopes among the lizards, and, in summer, are smitten unbearably by the sun. But the best way to visit the monastery and the groves is by road. A motor-car no doubt makes little of the

journey; but a carriage and pair such as I chartered at Florence for forty-five lire has to be away before seven, and, allowing three hours on the top, is not back again until the same hour in the evening; and this, the ancient way, with the beat of eight hoofs in one's ears, is the right way.

For several miles the road and the river—the Arno—run side by side—and the railway close by too—through venerable villages whose inhabitants derive their living either from the soil or the water, and amid vineyards all the time. Here and there a white villa is seen, but for the most part this is peasants' district: one such villa on the left, before Pontassieve, having about it and on each side of its drive, such cypresses as one seldom sees and only Gozzoli or Mr. Sargent could rightly paint, each in his own style. Not far beyond, in a scrap of meadow by the road, sat a girl knitting in the morning sun—with a placid glance at us as we rattled by; and ten hours later, when we rattled past again, there she still was, still knitting, in the evening sun, and again her quiet eyes were just raised and dropped.

At Pontassieve we stopped a while for coffee at an inn at the corner of the square of pollarded limes, and while it was preparing watched the little crumbling town at work, particularly the cooper opposite, who was finishing a massive cask within whose recesses good Chianti is doubtless now maturing; and then on the white road again, to the turning, a mile farther on, to the left, where one bids the Arno farewell till the late afternoon. Steady climbing now, and then a turn to the right and we see Pelago before us, perched on its crags, and by and by come to it—a tiny town, with a clean and alluring inn, very different from the squalor of Pontassieve: famous in art and particularly Florentine art as being the birthplace of Lorenzo Ghiberti,

who made the Baptistery doors. From Pelago the road descends with extreme steepness to a brook in a rocky valley, at a bridge over which the real climb begins, to go steadily on (save for another swift drop before Tosi) until Vallombrosa is reached, winding through woods all the way, chiefly chestnut—those woods which gave Milton, who was here in 1638, his famous simile.[1] The heat was now becoming intense (it was mid-September) and the horses were suffering, and most of this last stage was done at walking pace; but such was the exhilaration of the air, such the delight of the aromas which the breeze continually wafted from the woods, now sweet, now pungent, and always refreshing, that one felt no fatigue even though walking too. And so at last the monastery, and what was at that moment better than anything, lunch.

The beauty and joy of Vallombrosa, I may say at once are Nature's, not man's. The monastery, which is now a Government school of forestry, is ugly and unkempt; the hotel is unattractive; the few people one meets want to sell something or take you for a drive. But in an instant in any direction one can be in the woods—and at this level they are pine woods, soft underfoot and richly perfumed—and a quarter of an hour's walking brings the view. It is then that you realize you are on a mountain indeed.

[1] "Thick as leaves in Vallombrosa" has come to be the form of words as most people quote them. But Milton wrote ("Paradise Lost," Book I. 300-304):—

> "He called
> His legions, angel-forms, who lay entranced
> Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks
> In Vallombrosa where the Etrurian shades,
> High over-arched, embower."

Wordsworth, by the way, when he visited Vallombrosa with Crabb Robinson in 1837, wrote an inferior poem there, in a rather common metre, in honour of Milton's association with it.

Florence is to the north-west in the long Arno valley, which is here precipitous and narrow. The river is far below—if you slipped you would slide into it—fed by tumbling Apennine streams from both walls. The top of the mountain is heathery like Scotland and open; but not long will it be so, for everywhere are the fenced parallelograms which indicate that a villa is to be erected. Nothing, however, can change the mountain air or the glory of the surrounding heights.

Another view, unbroken by villas but including the monastery and the Foresters Hotel in the immediate foreground, and extending as far as Florence itself (on suitable days), is obtained from Il Paradisino, a white building on a ledge which one sees from the hotel above the monastery. But that is not by any means the top. The view covers much of the way by which we came hither.

Of the monastery of Vallombrosa we have had foreshadowings in Florence. We saw at the Accademia two exquisite portraits by Fra Bartolommeo of Vallombrosan monks. We saw at the Bargello the remains of a wonderful frieze by Benedetto da Rovezzano for the tomb of the founder of the order, S. Giovanni Gualberto; we shall see at S. Miniato scenes in the saint's life on the site of the ancient chapel where the crucifix bent and blessed him. As the head of the monastery Gualberto was famous for the severity and thoroughness of his discipline. But though a martinet as an abbot, personally he was humble and mild. His advice on all kinds of matters is said to have been invited even by kings and popes. He invented the system of lay brothers to help with the domestic work of the convent; and after a life of holiness, which comprised several miracles, he died in 1073 and was subsequently canonized.

The monastery, as I have said, is now secularized, save

for the chapel, where three resident monks perform service. One may wander through its rooms and see in the refectory, beneath portraits of famous brothers, the tables now laid for young foresters. The museum of forestry is interesting to those interested in museums of forestry.

It was to the monastery at Vallombrosa that the Brownings travelled in 1848 when Mrs. Browning was ill. But the abbot could not break the rules in regard to women, and after five days they had to return to Florence. Browning used to play the organ in the chapel, as, it is said, Milton had done two centuries earlier.

At such a height and with only a short season the hotel proprietors must do what they can, and prices do not rule low. A departing American was eyeing his bill with a rueful glance as we were leaving. "Milton had it wrong," he said to me (with the freemasonry of the plucked, for I knew him not), "what he meant was, 'thick as thieves'."

We returned by way of Sant' Ellero, the gallant horses trotting steadily down the hill, and then beside the Arno once more all the way to Florence. It chanced to be a great day in the city—September 20th, the anniversary of the final defeat of papal temporal power, in 1870—which we were not sorry to have missed, the first tidings coming to us from the beautiful tower of the Palazzo Vecchio which in honour of the occasion had been picked out with fairy lamps.

Among the excursions which I think ought to be made if one is in Florence for any justifying length of time is a visit to Prato. This ancient town one should see for several reasons: for its age and for its walls; for its great piazza (with a pile of vividly dyed yarn in the midst) surrounded by arches under which coppersmiths hammer all day at shining rotund vessels, while their wives plait

straw; for Filippino Lippi's exquisite Madonna in a little mural shrine at the narrow end of the piazza, which a woman (fetched by a crowd of ragged boys) will unlock for threepence; and for the cathedral, with Filippino's dissolute father's frescoes in it, the Salome being one of the most interesting pre-Botticelli scenes in Italian art. If only it had its colour what a wonder of lightness and beauty this still would be! But probably most people are attracted to Prato chiefly by Donatello and Michelozzo's outdoor pulpit, the frieze of which is a kind of practice work for the famous cantoria in the museum of the cathedral at Florence, with just such wanton boys dancing round it.

On a Good Friday evening in the lovely dying light of April some years ago, I was taken by tram to Grassina to see the famous procession of the Gesù Morto. The number of people on the same errand having thrown out the tram service, we had very long waits, while the road was thronged with other vehicles; and the result was I was tired enough—having been standing all the way—when Grassina was reached, for festivals six miles out of Florence at seven in the evening disarrange good habits. But a few pence spent in the albergo on bread and cheese and wine soon restored me. A queer cavern of a place, this inn, with rough tables, rows and rows of wine flasks, and an open fire behind the bar, tended by an old woman, from which everything good to eat proceeded rapidly without dismay—roast chicken and fish in particular. A strapping girl with high cheek bones and a broad dark comely face washed plates and glasses assiduously, and two waiters, with eyes as near together as monkeys', served the customers with bewildering intelligence. It was the sort of inn that in England would throw up its hands if you asked even for cold beef.

The piazza of Grassina, which, although merely a village, is enterprising enough to have a cinematoscope hall, was full of stalls given chiefly to the preparation and sale of cake like the Dutch wafelen, and among the stalls were conjurors, cheap-jacks, singers, and dice throwers; while every moment brought its fresh motor-car or carriage load, nearly all speaking English with a nasal twang. Meanwhile every one shouted, the naphtha flared, the drums beat, the horses champed. The street was full too, chiefly of peasants, but among them myriad resolute American virgins, in motor veils, whom nothing can ever surprise; a few American men, sceptical, as ever, of anything ever happening; here and there a diffident Englishwoman and Englishman, more in the background, but destined in the end to see all. But what I chiefly noticed was the native girls, with their proud bosoms carried high and nothing on their heads. They at any rate know their own future. No rushing over the globe for them, but the simple natural home life and children.

In the gloom the younger girls in white muslin were like pretty ghosts, each followed by a solicitous mother, giving a touch here and a touch there—mothers who once wore muslin too, will wear it no more, and are now happy in pride in their daughters. And very little girls too,—mere tots—wearing wings, who very soon were to join the procession as angels.

And all the while the darkness was growing and on the hill where the church stands lights were beginning to move about, in that mysterious way which torches have when a procession is being mobilized, while all the villas on the hills around had their rows of candles.

And then the shifting flames came gradually into a mass and took a steady upward progress, and the melancholy

strains of an ancient ecclesiastical lamentation reached our listening ears. As the lights drew nearer I left the bank where all the Mamies and Sadies with their Mommas were stationed and walked down into the river valley to meet the vanguard. On the bridge I found a little band of Roman soldiers on horseback, without stirrups, and had a few words with one of them as to his anachronistic cigarette, and then the first torches arrived, carried by proud little boys in red; and after the torches the little girls in muslin veils, which were, however, for the most part disarranged for the better recognition of relations and even more perhaps for recognition by relations: and very pretty this recognition was on both sides. And then the village priests in full canonicals, looking a little self-conscious, and after them the dead Christ on a litter carried by a dozen *contadini* who had a good deal to say to each other as they bore Him.

This was the same dead Christ which had been lying in state in the church, for the past few days, to be worshipped and kissed by the peasantry. I had seen a similar image at Settignano the day before and had watched how the men took it. They began by standing in groups in the piazza, gossipping. Then two or three would break away and make for the church. There, all among the women and children, half-shyly, half-defiantly, they pecked at the plaster flesh and returned to resume the conversation in the piazza with a new serenity and confidence in their hearts.

After the dead Christ came a triumphal car of the very little girls with wings, signifying I know not what, but intensely satisfying to the onlookers. One little wet-nosed cherub I patted, so chubby and innocent she was; and Heaven send that the impulse profited me! This car was drawn by an ancient white horse, amiable and tractable as a

saint, but as bewildered as I as to the meaning of the whole strange business. After the car of angels a stalwart body of white-vestmented singers, sturdy fellows with black moustaches who had been all day among the vines, or steering placid white oxen through the furrows, and were now lifting their voices in a *miserere*. And after them the painted plaster Virgin, carried as upright as possible, and then more torches and the wailing band; and after the band another guard of Roman soldiers.

Such was the Grassina procession. It passed slowly and solemnly through the town from the hill and up the hill again; and not soon shall I forget the mournfulness of the music, which nothing of tawdriness in the constituents of the procession itself could rid of impressiveness and beauty. One thing is certain—all processions, by day or night, should first descend a hill and then ascend one. All should walk to melancholy strains. Indeed, a joyful procession becomes an impossible thought after this.

And then I sank luxuriously into a corner seat in the waiting tram, and, seeking for the return journey's fare, found that during the proceedings my purse had been stolen.